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Greg Dyke versus the two-pint player

With the national team off to Rio and the national governing body gazing at its navel, Mick Owen takes a look at the national game and offers Greg Dyke some advice.

At the time this article is being committed to virtual paper the Football Association (FA) is running scared. The spectre which has terrorised the blazered denizens of Wembley's integral office suites is neither the national team's possible failure to get out of next year's World Cup group nor the prospect that someone in television will finally see through the fallacy that says people like having endless football matches tinkling away in the corner of their living rooms rather than entertainment. No, the bogeyman that threatens our largest governing body of sport is the equity lobby, which, as we speak, is being led by agencies concerned with race rather than gender or sexuality, although both of these remain in the van.

Leading the line, as indeed she should, is the latest incumbent in what we like to think of Dennis Howell's old chair, the minister for sport, Helen Grant; well, minister for sport and, er, equalities to give her the full title. She has followed the FA's own director Heather Rabbatts, their former first-team centre back Sol Campbell and their own diversity partner Kick It Out into the lists wildly waving a banner marked, "Diversity; we'd like to see it."

Not only did Roy Hodgson, a football manager made in the image of an obscure public school's head of classics, completely nullify the wave of positive support which followed his team's laboured qualification for the Brazil-based bacchanal next summer by using a term so loaded with negative connotations that it could give N-word a run for its money, his employers then knocked that controversy into the nearest cocked hat by announcing that its commission into "the 'alarming' decline in home-grown talent playing at the top level" would be made up of middle-aged, white men. The quotation is from The Guardian newspaper, which in turn quotes Greg Dyke, the new chairman of the FA and the man with a burr under his saddle about the paucity of talent available to his national coaches.

By announcing the identities of eight of his new commissioners Dyke effectively declared open season on the whole process and by adding the sainted Hodgson he did little to divert his critics' barrage. The belated announcement that Rio Ferdinand, an advocate for better treatment of players from black and ethnic minority backgrounds and a current exponent of the beautiful game at almost the highest level (having been jettisoned by Hodgson while in the midst of a nasty, racially-aggravated spat with the determinedly white John Terry, he now only plays for mid-ranking Manchester United) is to complete the commission, may have obviated some of the ordure heading towards Dyke's air-handling device, but only some.

The saddest part of all this, though, is the fact that a commission is needed at all; or rather that the solution to the perceived problem of a lack of talent coming through is perceived to be something as cumbersome and outmoded as a ten-man committee. If you were part of the FA's own game development department you might be insulted. If you were the brains behind the latest developments in children's football www.theleisurereview.co.uk

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which have seen fewer players on smaller pitches and law-changes which demand the ball be “played out from the back”, thus discouraging “just hoofing it up the park to the big lad”, you might be packing your bags and looking for work elsewhere. And if you were that man with his dog, often the only disinterested observer of grassroots football, you might wonder why nobody asked you. Given that Rio Ferdinand’s perspective is informed by his playing experience as much as his racial background and that the other luminaries will all carry the crosses of their own perspective – and being over 50 very few will be spending much time on the business side of the whitewash or even alongside it with their collars turned up against a bitter easterly and their toes getting more damp by the second – what does this commission really know of real grassroots soccer?

The answer to that last question need not detain us but just supposing Mr Dyke actually asked for an unbiased account, what would he hear? Your correspondent, a man with not one but two dogs and no passion whatsoever for the nation’s game, went and had a look.

Parachuted (well, narrowboated) as my party was into the middle of England, and without the will or the wherewithal to research who it was we saw pounding the grass of a not-quite level but nonetheless very picturesque footy pitch into mud one autumnal Sunday lunchtime, it is not possible to properly contextualise the match in question. There were two teams, both nicely kitted out in matching shirts, shorts and socks, both comprising lads in their late teens. There were two well-turned out older men who shouted and pointed and may well have called themselves coaches. There was a man in black with a whistle. But what league, what level, what teams they were must always remain a mystery. They must have been good though, judging by the infrastructure.

To one side of the pitch there were cones by the dozen and matching bags with plastic hurdles and slalom poles. There were dozens of footballs. There was even a ladder for putting up the goal nets. There were goal nets! The warm-up took quite some time and ended with each team forming a line, passing a ball to their coach who “laid it off” for each player to kick the ball very hard in the general direction of the goal. At one point one goalkeeper faced 10 of his own team mates and was called into action once, to pick the ball out of the net. The most accurate bit of play seen in the 20-minute vignette allowed us by our itinerary was when one young man chipped a ball fully 30 metres to slam into a rack of water bottles. He meant to do it but he never once replicated it in game conditions.

That was also the only time anyone was seen to smile. From first encountering the event to a last sight of it through the trees, the emphasis was on industry, effort and unsmiling commitment; the suggestion was that this was important. The football was dire. No one, from referee to spectator, from goalkeeper to lone front-man thought this game of football was anything less than life-defining. It mattered. And yet they were crap.

Does anyone involved in football recognise that the whole premise is footling? Does nobody ever smile? How far down the soccer pyramid do you have to go to find people doing it for a laugh? And where does this pious belief that football matters actually come from?

One answer to the last question is hinted at by a conversation about a failing miners’ welfare institute and its constituent clubs held some half-dozen years ago in a north Nottinghamshire village essentially built to serve the local pit. While the crown green bowls club and the snooker league both generated some income to offset the parent club’s growing deficit, their football team actually cost them money. The players, it seemed, would only turn out if remunerated. Their recompense for 90 minutes carrying the club’s colours and an advertisement for a local

curry house amounted to the price of two pints of strong lager, which they tended to drink at their own local, not even having the good manners to drink in their own clubhouse. Their coach, himself receiving some form of stipend, on being asked to offer an assessment of his team's footballing quality, merely snorted.

That there is too much money in the game is an oft-expressed opinion; but who knew it pervaded even the lowliest of levels of the organised game? With 3G pitches replacing grass and adding approximately £60,000 per annum to the public deficit while commercial companies package "five-a-side" on an industrial scale, even the disorganised game is becoming cash-dependent. Do kids go to parks for a kick-about any more? Does anybody book a sports hall, find nine mates and go for a game after work? When was the last time a boy put his jumper down as a goalpost?

The questions, of course, are the easy bit. Can we offer Mr Dyke an answer? Just one. Lighten up, man. It is time football stopped taking itself so seriously. If a non-league team turn up to play a match in kit exactly matching their opponents, let them wear bibs. In fact, let's outlaw matching kit altogether. Instead get everyone to bring their favourite replica shirt – they cost enough, for goodness sake – and then turn half of them inside out. Then jettison all the coaching equipment, videos and drills websites – and the semi-qualified coaches who use them instead of their imagination and intelligence – and let the players practise what they want, even if that is keep-uppy or nothing at all. And while we're cleaning up this particular Augean stable, stop leagues, ban cups and don't keep score.

And above all, Greg, get your backside on to a couple of touchlines, watch some bad football (there is a lot of it about) and then tell the entire FA apparatus to take the week off to return refreshed, revitalised and with a sense of perspective about what matters; because football really doesn't.

Mick Owen is an experienced coach and long-term resident of the sidelines of pitches of all kinds.

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